

# Dead Season<sup>1</sup>

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In Kyoto, the Obon festival in honor of the spirits of ancestors falls around the middle of August. The day of the festival varies according to region and the type of calendar (solar or lunar) used. The Kanto region, including Tokyo, observes Obon in mid-July, while northern Kanto, Chugoku, Shikoku, and Okinawa celebrate their Old Bon (Kyu Bon) on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar.

For most Japanese, though, August, shimmering Nilotic August, is dead season. Children have their school break, Parliament is not in session, and as many who can afford it go abroad. Because Kyoto sits in a valley, daytime temperature can run up to the mid- and even upper 30s.

Obon is not a public holiday, but people often take leave to return to their ancestral hometowns to visit and clean the family burial grounds. The Bon Odori dance is based on the story of the monk Mokuren, who on Buddha's advice was able to ease the suffering of his dead mother and who was said to have danced for joy at her release. The festival culminates in paper lanterns being floated across rivers and in dazzling displays of fireworks.

An added attraction in Kyoto is the Daimonji festival held on August 16. Between 8:00 and 8:20 p.m., fires in the shape of the characters "great" (dai, 大) and "wondrous dharma" (myo/ho 妙法) and in the shapes of a boat and a torii gate are lit in succession on five mountains encircling the city. These fires are intended to send off the spirits to their world after their all-too-brief visit among the living.

For those who are used to paying their respects to the dead by the Christian calendar, the heat and humidity that attend Obon seem a world away from the chilly November mornings of Todos los Santos and All Souls' Day. But for those in Asia who grew up with a syncretism of Buddhist, Taoist

and folk practices, Obon is more likely to remind them of the Chinese Ghost Festival, which falls on the 15<sup>th</sup> day (14<sup>th</sup> for Southern Chinese) of the seventh month of the lunisolar calendar, August 10 this year. In the Chinese tradition, the ghosts and spirits get to spend a longer time—up to a month—abroad, and unlike the Qingming festival, the living are expected to honor all of the dead, and not just their own kin, during the Ghost festival.

Because the dead roam the world at will during this time, stories abound of their doings and their effects on the living. These days, however, stories are no longer enough; they have to be authenticated by technology to prove that they are as real as the movies based on them.

In Japan, the belief that things, not merely persons, can be possessed has a long history. Any number of things can acquire self-awareness if they become old enough: there are distinct terms for haunted umbrellas, sake jars, prayer beads, saddles, mirrors, graters, clocks, kimono hung from racks, tea kettles, futon beds, scrolls and papers, straw coats and sandals, and folding screens.

The other day on Japanese television, a show called “Scream Nonstop” featured ghosts allegedly captured on video and in photographs. Some of them are amateur J-Horror, pure contrivances in bad make-up. One man appears to have an inexplicable knack for carrying a video camera with him whenever he responds to a knock on the door, only to record thin air and then, after the second knocking, a woman in black squatting by his refrigerator.

In another, a man tapes his girlfriend crossing a wooden footbridge and watches her stumble, but his camera just happens to freeze at the moment when a dark, male face appears between the wooden slats of the bridge.

Other clips claim to be from closed-circuit security cameras in a parking lot in Malaysia or a convenience store in Japan, capturing the moment when a car comes to a sudden halt before a semi-transparent figure in a business suit, serenely headed toward an empty stall, or a woman in a low-cut red dress standing—no, hovering—behind a customer who strolls casually into the store.

The spookiest may be a cc-camera shot of an underground parking garage, where a small, unmanned tricycle rolls out of a hallway and then comes to an abrupt stop, followed seconds later by what appears to be a pair of pale feet taking baby steps away from the bike.

There is an interview with a train conductor who claims to be able to see death in the faces of other people, death basically taking the form of a dark cloud that erases their features. There is a woman who was unfortunate enough to have been on board a bus tour when a female ghost came gliding down the aisle, moaning, "Let me go with you."

Another bus driver, seeing a little girl dribbling a ball in the parking lot, takes her by the hand and asks her to bring him to her mother, who is sitting in a bench nearby, texting busily on a cellphone. When he scolds the woman for letting her child play in a dangerous area, the woman does not look up from her mass of hair, merely growling: "Yes, it's dangerous. What did you do to my child?" And he looks down to see the badly burned face of the little girl and then the decaying features of the mother.

One small temple specializes in long-distance exorcism. A novice monk brings out a cardboard box filled with letters from all over the country, going back decades. In some of the photographs attached, faces appear on windshields of playground cars and even under the armpits of schoolboys having their group photo taken. More than any video chat footage of hands crawling over women's shoulders, these vintage photographs bear residues of disquiet, if not fear, at least enough to send them by airmail in search of answers or, failing those, prayers.

For all that ghosts and spirits appear universal in the sense that many cultures believe in their existence, they remain culture-bound in the way that they present themselves to the living. In Japan, they flit in the corner of one's gaze or off to the side of the camera in dead-white kimono. If they are women, they sport long, disheveled hair that covers most of their Kabuki-painted faces, but if they are men, they are stuck with 1970s-style shag haircuts and David Bowie eye mascara.

But in an age where people move around more freely and frequently, what happens when they encounter ghosts in a country not their own? Would a crucifix work in Bangkok and would a mantra suffice in Manila? Pinoys from the Tagalog region would be brought up on tales of the viscera-sucking manananggal, women with bat wings, capable of detaching their upper torsos from the rest of their bodies, but their cousins in Sabah and

the Malay peninsula would be more familiar with the penanggalan, the flying female heads whose stomachs and entrails emit twinkling light as the hantu go about their business.

We expect our ghosts to travel the long route across time but insist that they remain rooted in a specific place.

What to do, then, when an old woman appears at the foot of the bed, in a tiny apartment in Singapore, to an overseas Filipino worker? Is the crone from home, or is she bound to this place that the OFW calls her temporary home? This actually happened to a sister's friend, and the friend found no relief after mumbling all the prayers she knew, for after appealing to the Christian God and to Buddha and Kwan Yin to send the old woman away, the girl peeked out of her blanket, only to find the old woman still standing there, gazing mournfully at her. After a while, though, the old woman disappeared, probably out of boredom.

As far as playful commentaries on hauntings and ghosts go, few can match Hong Kong-based Alfonso Wong (Wong Chak, 王澤)'s Lao Fu Zi (Old Master Q) comics, which many Southeast Asian Chinese grew up reading. Some of the classic strips are available on the official website, and to see them is to laugh and marvel at the ways in which talking about ghosts can be a way of talking about ourselves.

In one strip, Old Master Q introduces a woman sporting a "shaggy devil" haircut to a Thousand-Year-Old Vampire sporting a similar hairstyle. In another, Master Q, having died in a car accident, ascends to heaven, and the dead people around him get excited when they learn that he was run over by a Rolls Royce, not just any car. In still another, Master Q is hit by a chair that someone has carelessly thrown out of a balcony, and Lao Fu Zi's gentlemanly ghost returns the chair to its terrified owner. Old Master Q goes fishing, and wheels an irate version of himself out of the water. Dracula is frightened off by Master Q's screams of terror. A demon scares Master Q out of bed, and when Master Q comes back to his bedroom, he finds the demon sleeping in his bed. Big Potato, Master Q's friend, is so frightened by a movie that he comes out of the movie house literally diminished. Running away from a demon, Master Q frantically scavenges

for objects that he can fashion into a cross, and ends up waving a crossed hammer and sickle (youngsters born after the fall of the Berlin Wall may miss the joke about Communism here).

In some episodes, Master Q appears as a demon-slayer, dispatching demons, bureaucrats from the underworld, and a capricious, white-haired and bearded God who unleashes earthquakes and natural disasters, pestilence, false truths, and jealousy on humankind. In one instance, Master Q dies from poverty and hunger, and wreaks vengeance upon the spirit in charge of human souls who, acting like a typical bureaucrat, asks for an accounting of his deeds.

Ghost stories can be commentaries as well. Master Q escapes the clutches of a ghost but fares badly in the hands of another predator, the mugger. Master Q ascends to heaven, only to complain to God that the air pollution in heaven is worse than that on earth, and comes back to life, surprising his grieving friends. Master Q puts an umbrella over the God of Earth's altar on a rainy day, and finds a large gold tael on the road, but the gold promptly disappears when a sudden wind blows off the umbrella over the To-Ti-Kong altar. Master Q prays to a god from Jiangsu province, and when Big Potato asks him how he can pray to the god when he does not speak the Suzhou topolect, Master Q matter-of-factly says that he uses English. The moon goddess Chang'e, clad in traditional Chinese clothing, brings Master Q a box of pizza rather than mooncakes. Master Q chances upon a wad of cash, only to have it snatched away by a thief, who then loses the money to a Chinese god borne on a cloud. Master Q's guardian angel counsels him against drinking, but surreptitiously takes a sip himself. A ghost creeps up behind Master Q to scare him, only to be scared off by the ghost stories Master Q is reading.

These stories, by mixing religions and their gods and demons and reflecting on divine and human retribution (or the lack thereof), convey the fear and skepticism, the awe and absurdity, that underpin our sense of the straight but porous line that separates the living from the dead.

### Note

- <sup>1</sup> This travel narrative was originally published in the author's blog, *Letters to Narcissus*, on 13 August 2014. Its original title is "Obon." Visit <http://letterstonarcissus.com/>.